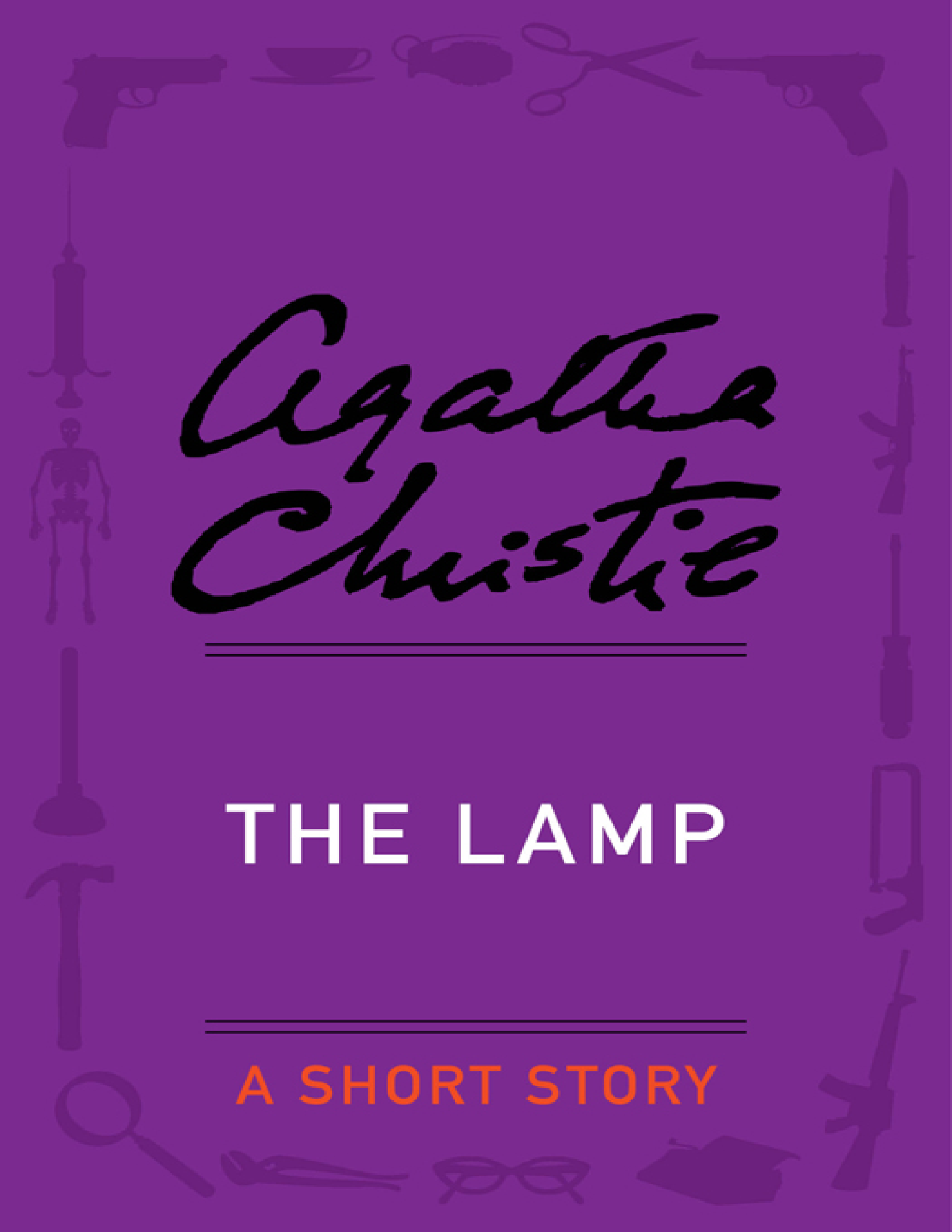

Agatha Christie

THE LAMP

A SHORT STORY

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The Lamp

A Short Story

Agatha Christie

WITNESS
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THE LAMP

It was undoubtedly an old house. The whole square was old, with that disapproving dignified old age often met with in a cathedral town. But No. 19 gave the impression of an elder among elders; it had a veritable patriarchal solemnity; it towered greyest of the grey, haughtiest of the haughty, chillest of the chill. Austere, forbidding, and stamped with that particular desolation attaching to all houses that have been long untenanted, it reigned above the other dwellings.

In any other town it would have been freely labelled "haunted," but Weyminster was averse from ghosts and considered them hardly respectable except at the appanage of a "county family." So No. 19 was never alluded to as a haunted house; but nevertheless it remained, year after year, TO BE LET OR SOLD.

Mrs. Lancaster looked at the house with approval as she drove up with the talkative house agent, who was in an unusually hilarious mood at the idea of getting No. 19 off his books. He inserted the key in the door without ceasing his appreciative comments.

"How long has the house been empty?" inquired Mrs. Lancaster, cutting short his flow of language rather brusquely.

Mr. Raddish (of Raddish and Foplow) became slightly confused.

"E—er—some time," he remarked blandly.

"So I should think," said Mrs. Lancaster drily.

The dimly lighted hall was chill with a sinister chill. A more imaginative woman might have shivered, but this woman happened to be eminently practical. She was tall with much dark brown hair just tinged with grey and rather cold blue eyes.

She went over the house from attic to cellar, asking a pertinent question from time to time. The inspection over, she came back into one of the front rooms looking out on the square and faced the agent with a resolute mien.

“What is the matter with the house?”

Mr. Raddish was taken by surprise.

“Of course, an unfurnished house is always a little gloomy,” he parried feebly.

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Lancaster. “The rent is ridiculously low for such a house—purely nominal. There must be some reason for it. I suppose the house is haunted?”

Mr. Raddish gave a nervous little start but said nothing.

Mrs. Lancaster eyed him keenly. After a few moments she spoke again.

“Of course that is all nonsense, I don’t believe in ghosts or anything of that sort, and personally it is no deterrent to my taking the house; but servants, unfortunately, are very credulous and easily frightened. It would be kind of you to tell me exactly what—what thing *is* supposed to haunt this place.”

“I—er—really don’t know,” stammered the house agent.

“I am sure you must,” said the lady quietly. “I cannot take the house without knowing. What was it? A murder?”

“Oh! no,” cried Mr. Raddish, shocked by the idea of anything so alien to the respectability of the square. “It’s—it’s only a child.”

“A child?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know the story exactly,” he continued reluctantly. “Of course, there are all kinds of different versions, but I believe that about thirty years ago a man going by the name of Williams took No. 19. Nothing was known of him; he kept no servants; he had no friends; he seldom went out in the day time. He had one child, a little boy. After he had been there about two months, he went up to London, and had barely set foot in the metropolis before he was recognized as being a man ‘wanted’ by the police on some charge—exactly what, I do not know. But it must have been a grave one, because, sooner than give himself up he shot himself. Meanwhile, the child lived on here, alone in the house. He had food for a little time, and he waited day after day for his father’s return. Unfortunately, it had been impressed upon him that he was never under any circumstances to go out of the house or speak to anyone. He was a weak, ailing, little creature, and did not dream of disobeying this command. In the night, the neighbours, not

knowing that his father had gone away, often heard him sobbing in the awful loneliness and desolation of the empty house."

Mr. Raddish paused.

"And—er—the child starved to death," he concluded, in the same tones as he might have announced that it had just begun to rain.

"And it is the child's ghost that is supposed to haunt the place?" asked Mrs. Lancaster.

"It is nothing of consequence really," Mr. Raddish hastened to assure her. "There's nothing *seen,* not *seen,* only people say, ridiculous, of course, but they do say they hear—the child—crying, you know."

Mrs. Lancaster moved towards the front door.

"I like the house very much," she said. "I shall get nothing as good for the price. I will think it over and let you know."

"It really looks very cheerful, doesn't it, Papa?"

Mrs. Lancaster surveyed her new domain with approval. Gay rugs, well-polished furniture, and many knickknacks, had quite transformed the gloomy aspect of No. 19.

She spoke to a thin, bent old man with stooping shoulders and a delicate mystical face. Mr. Winburn did not resemble his daughter; indeed no greater contrast could be imagined than that presented by her resolute practicalness and his dreamy abstraction.

"Yes," he answered with a smile, "no one would dream the house was haunted."

"Papa, don't talk nonsense! On our first day too."

Mr. Winburn smiled.

"Very well, my dear, we will agree that there are no such things as ghosts."

"And please," continued Mrs. Lancaster, "don't say a word before Geoff. He's so imaginative."

Geoff was Mrs. Lancaster's little boy. The family consisted of Mr. Winburn, his widowed daughter, and Geoffrey.

Rain had begun to beat against the window—pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

"Listen," said Mr. Winburn. "Is it not like little footsteps?"

“It is more like rain,” said Mrs. Lancaster, with a smile.

“But *that*, *that* is a footstep,” cried her father, bending forward to listen.

Mrs. Lancaster laughed outright.

Mr. Winburn was obliged to laugh too. They were having tea in the hall, and he had been sitting with his back to the staircase. He now turned his chair round to face it.

Little Geoffrey was coming down, rather slowly and sedately, with a child’s awe of a strange place. The stairs were of polished oak, uncarpeted. He came across and stood by his mother. Mr. Winburn gave a slight start. As the child was crossing the floor, he distincty heard another pair of footsteps on the stairs, as of someone following Geoffrey. Dragging footsteps, curiously painful they were. Then he shrugged his shoulders incredulously. “The rain, no doubt,” he thought.

“I’m looking at the spongecakes,” remarked Geoff with the admirably detached air of one who points out an interesting fact.

His mother hastened to comply with the hint.

“Well, Sonny, how do you like your new home?” she asked.

“Lots,” replied Geoffrey with his mouth generously filled. “Pounds and pounds and pounds.” After this last assertion, which was evidently expressive of the deepest contentment, he relapsed into silence, only anxious to remove the spongecake from the sight of man in the least time possible.

Having bolted the last mouthful, he burst forth into speech.

“Oh! Mummy, there’s attics here, Jane says; and can I go at once and *egg*zplore them? And there might be a secret door, Jane says there isn’t, but I think there must be, and, anyhow, I know there’ll be *pipes*, *water pipes* (with a face full of ecstasy) and can I play with them, and, oh! can I go and see the Boi-i-ler?” He spun out the last word with such evident rapture that his grandfather felt ashamed to reflect that this peerless delight of childhood only conjured up to his imagination the picture of hot water that wasn’t hot, and heavy and numerous plumber’s bills.

“We’ll see about the attics tomorrow, darling,” said Mrs. Lancaster. “Suppose you fetch your bricks and build a nice house, or an engine.”

“Don’t want to build an ’ouse.”

“House.”

“House, or h’engine h’either.”

“Build a boiler,” suggested his grandfather.

Geoffrey brightened.

“With pipes?”

“Yes, lots of pipes.”

Geoffrey ran away happily to fetch his bricks.

The rain was still falling. Mr. Winburn listened. Yes, it must have been the rain he had heard; but it did sound like footsteps.

He had a queer dream that night.

He dreamt that he was walking through a town, a great city it seemed to him. But it was a children’s city; there were no grown-up people there, nothing but children, crowds of them. In his dream they all rushed to the stranger crying: “Have you brought him?” It seemed that he understood what they meant and shook his head sadly. When they saw this, the children turned away and began to cry, sobbing bitterly.

The city and the children faded away and he awoke to find himself in bed, but the sobbing was still in his ears. Though wide awake, he heard it distinctly; and he remembered that Geoffrey slept on the floor below, while this sound of a child’s sorrow descended from above. He sat up and struck a match. Instantly the sobbing ceased.

Mr. Winburn did not tell his daughter of the dream or its sequel. That it was no trick of his imagination, he was convinced; indeed soon afterwards he heard it again in the day time. The wind was howling in the chimney but *this* was a separate sound—distinct, unmistakable; pitiful little heartbroken sobs.

He found out too, that he was not the only one to hear them. He overheard the housemaid saying to the parlour maid that she “didn’t think as that there nurse was kind to Master Geoffrey, she’d ’eard ’im crying ’is little ’eart out only that morning.” Geoffrey had come down to breakfast and lunch beaming with health and happiness; and Mr. Winburn knew that it was not Geoff who had been crying, but that other child whose dragging footsteps had startled him more than once.

Mrs. Lancaster alone never heard anything. Her ears were not perhaps attuned to catch sounds from another world.

Yet one day she also received a shock.

“Mummy,” said Geoff plaintively. “I wish you’d let me play with that little boy.”

Mrs. Lancaster looked up from her writing table with a smile.

“What little boy, dear?”

“I don’t know his name. He was in a attic, sitting on the floor crying, but he ran away when he saw me. I suppose he was *shy* (with slight contempt), not like a *big* boy, and then, when I was in the nursery building, I saw him standing in the door watching me build, and he looked so awful lonely and as though he wanted to play wiv me. I said: ‘Come and build a h’engine,’ but he didn’t say nothing, just looked as—as though he saw a lot of chocolates, and his Mummy had told him not to touch them.” Geoff sighed, sad personal reminiscences evidently recurring to him. “But when I asked Jane who he was and told her I wanted to play wiv him, she said there wasn’t no little boy in the ’ouse and not to tell naughty stories. I don’t love Jane at all.”

Mrs. Lancaster got up.

“Jane was right. There was no little boy.”

“But I saw him. Oh! Mummy, do let me play wiv him, he did look so awful lonely and unhappy. I *do* want to do something to ‘make him better.’ ”

Mrs. Lancaster was about to speak again, but her father shook his head.

“Geoff,” he said very gently, “that poor little boy *is* lonely, and perhaps you may do something to comfort him; but you must find out how by yourself—like a puzzle—do you see?”

“Is it because I am getting *big* I must do it all my lone?”

“Yes, because you are getting big.”

As the boy left the room, Mrs. Lancaster turned to her father impatiently.

“Papa, this is absurd. To encourage the boy to believe the servants” idle tales!”

“No servant has told the child anything,” said the old man gently. “He’s seen—what I *hear,* what I could see perhaps if I were his age.”

“But it’s such nonsense! Why don’t I see it or hear it?”

Mr. Winburn smiled, a curiously tired smile, but did not reply.

“Why?” repeated his daughter. “And why did you tell him he could help the—the—thing. It’s—it’s all so impossible.”

The old man looked at her with his thoughtful glance.

“Why not?” he said. “Do you remember these words:

‘What Lamp has Destiny to guide
Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?
“A Blind Understanding,” Heaven replied.’

“Geoffrey has that—a blind understanding. All children possess it. It is only as we grow older that we lose it, that we cast it away from us. Sometimes, when we are quite old, a faint gleam comes back to us, but the Lamp burns brightest in childhood. That is why I think Geoffrey may help.”

“I don’t understand,” murmured Mrs. Lancaster feebly.

“No more do I. That—that child is in trouble and wants—to be set free. But how? I do not know, but—it’s awful to think of it—sobbing its heart out—a *child.*”

A month after this conversation Geoffrey fell very ill. The east wind had been severe, and he was not a strong child. The doctor shook his head and said that it was a grave case. To Mr. Winburn he divulged more and confessed that the case was quite hopeless. “The child would never have lived to grow up, under any circumstances,” he added.

“There has been serious lung trouble for a long time.”

It was when nursing Geoff that Mrs. Lancaster became aware of that—other child. At first the sobs were an indistinguishable part of the wind, but gradually they became more distinct, more unmistakable. Finally she heard them in moments of dead calm: a child’s sobs—dull, hopeless, heartbroken.

Geoff grew steadily worse and in his delirium he spoke of the “little boy” again and again. “I do want to help him get away, I do!” he cried.

Succeeding the delirium there came a state of lethargy. Geoffrey lay very still, hardly breathing, sunk in oblivion. There was nothing to do but wait and watch. Then there came a still night, clear and calm, without one breath of wind.

Suddenly the child stirred. His eyes opened. He looked past his mother toward the open door. He tried to speak and she bent down to catch the half breathed words.

“All right, I’m comin’,” he whispered; then he sank back.

The mother felt suddenly terrified, she crossed the room to her father. Somewhere near them the other child was laughing. Joyful, contented, triumphant and silvery laughter echoed through the room.

“I’m frightened; I’m frightened,” she moaned.

He put his arm round her protectingly. A sudden gust of wind made them both start, but it passed swiftly and left the air quiet as before.

The laughter had ceased and there crept to them a faint sound, so faint as hardly to be heard, but growing louder till they could distinguish it. Footsteps—light footsteps, swiftly departing.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they ran—those well-known halting little feet. Yet—surely—now *other* footsteps suddenly mingled with them, moving with a quicker and a lighter tread.

With one accord they hastened to the door.

Down, down, down, past the door, close to them, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, went the unseen feet of the little children *together.*

Mrs. Lancaster looked up wildly.

“There are *two* of them—*two!*”

Grey with sudden fear, she turned towards the cot in the corner, but her father restrained her gently, and pointed away.

“There,” he said simply.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter—fainter and fainter.

And then—silence.

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About the Author

AGATHA CHRISTIE is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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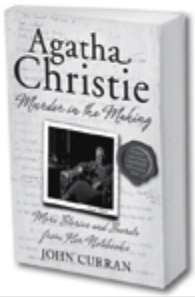

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